

BOOK REVIEW by
Gary Bravo, M.D.

LISTENING INTO THE HEART OF THINGS The Awakening of Love On MDMA and LSD: The Undesired Psychotherapy

By Samuel Widmer from Basic Editions, 1997. 302 pages.

AS THE TITLE SUGGESTS, this is really a book about one man's spiritual journey, the goal of the journey being the uncovering or "awakening" of Love—which is Widmer's term for the ultimate essence of the universe, and thus of our own nature. The book is only secondarily about psychedelic psychotherapy, or "psycholytic psychotherapy" as European convention terms psychotherapeutic work with psychedelic and empathogenic substances.

Widmer's devotional odes to the qualities of Love are interspersed throughout the book and take some getting used to, as does his verbose prose and poetry, which seem to be roughly translated at times. But once the reader lets go of expectations of any sort of linear treatise and follows the path that Widmer invites one to take, the book convincingly lays out the spiritual path of psychotherapy, also known as "depth psychology," as Widmer has come to understand it through at least 25 years of work as a physician, psychiatrist, and psychotherapist. What makes Widmer's knowledge of this path unique among the plethora of spiritual and transpersonal psychology writings is his extensive work with the "forbidden" therapeutic tools of psychedelic and empathogenic drugs.

As Widmer points out in his introduction, he is not out to please the public or cater to the authorities, stating that he has gotten beyond the immature behavior patterns of "conformity and opposition." Instead he takes the courageous leap of saying what he really thinks, without apology, without mincing words or toning down his transpersonal philosophy so as not to offend those who don't share his framework. He points out the fragmentation and alienation of the modern, Western, intellectualized psyche—its split from the body and the transpersonal—and the institutionalized tyranny of our families and social structures. The "normal" person in our society has superficially adapted to a pathological system, and

most psychotherapies help people "cope" and "adapt" to this system, which denies the deeper layers of the psyche, and persecutes those who openly embark on the journey of self-awareness.

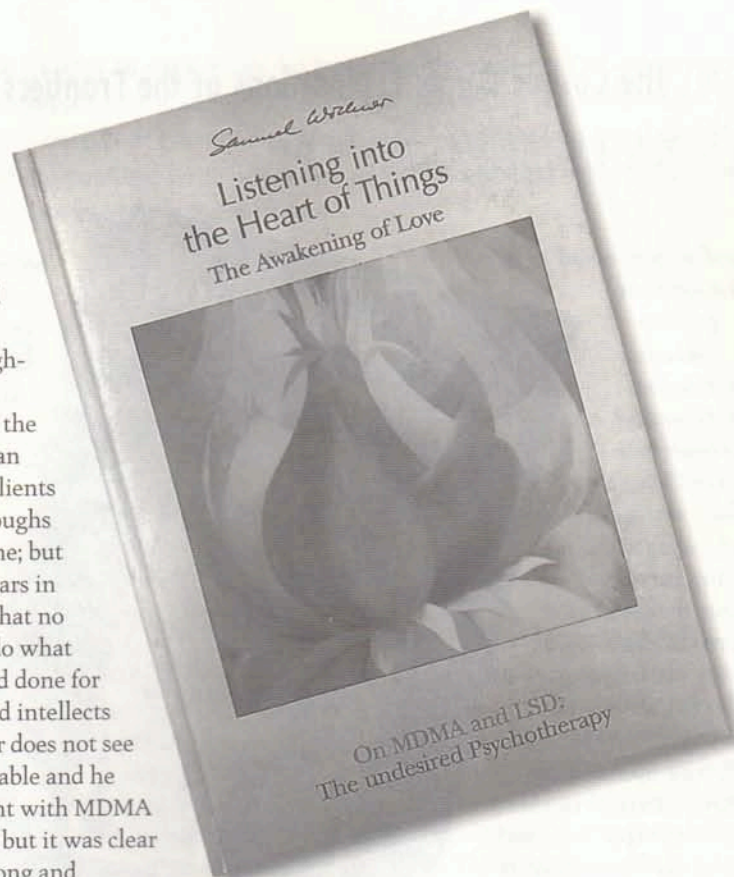
Widmer invites the reader to take this journey with him, exploring and accepting the onion-like layers of the psyche until one reaches what he calls the "kernel," the deep center of every consciousness which is the same for everyone and is identical to Love. But the journey to this Center is a difficult and frightening one, as personal identity and all levels of security and control have to be relinquished. To get there the traveler must first deal with repressed and suppressed feelings, first in the personal, then the societal, then the transpersonal unconscious.

Widmer's model of the psyche, illustrated with many simple diagrams in the book, is congruent with those of other transpersonal theorists and of the perennial philosophy. Again, what is unique to Widmer's thesis is his elaboration on how psychedelic substances can be used in the journey to awakening, a topic which has truly been "forbidden" due to strong taboos in modern cultures towards consciousness-expanding drugs, a reflection of the fear and repression in these cultures.

However, Widmer clearly sees the psychedelic drugs as adjuncts or tools of the psychotherapeutic path; and as this is a serious spiritual path he views the drugs as "sacraments." He has treated people who use psychedelics for "escapist" reasons who don't seem to develop spiritually; and in his personal psycholytic journeys he states he eventually has gotten to a place of repetition, where fascinating visions and states of mind have disappeared and a state of peaceful being predominates, a state that seems closer and closer to his baseline of everyday existence. He says that further psychedelic explorations have left him drained and so he has let them be a thing of the past.

Nonetheless, Widmer views the psychoac-

tive sacraments as extremely powerful tools, seeing MDMA and other empathogens as more useful for working with the personal unconscious, and LSD and the true psychedelics as more suited for opening up the transpersonal spaces. He spices up the book throughout with short case histories of treatment with MDMA or LSD, and the therapeutic breakthroughs which can result. He feels that many of these clients would have had the same breakthroughs eventually with psychotherapy alone; but the psycholytic substances saved years in many cases. In other cases he feels that no amount of talk therapy could ever do what one session with MDMA or LSD had done for some clients with strongly-defended intellects or character structures. Yet Widmer does not see psycholytic psychotherapy as infallible and he also gives examples where treatment with MDMA or LSD led to an opening in clients, but it was clear that it was just the beginning of a long and difficult working through, something which the clients either do or don't choose to do.



this is really a book about one man's spiritual journey

Those looking for a technical treatise on psychedelic therapy will be disappointed. There are no references to standard psychological, transpersonal, or psychedelic works and he doesn't compare his theories to other systems, although he mentions many influences. Widmer refers those readers interested in learning the more technical aspects of how to conduct psychedelic psychotherapy to the works of Stanislaw Grof or Hanscarl Leuner. Part Three of Widmer's book is essentially an appendix which deals with some of the general issues of psycholytic therapy—mechanisms of action, indications and contraindications, the use of ritual, music, bodywork, etc. He gives no recipes as he correctly sees that healing is an individual and intuitive art, dependent mostly on the psychotherapist's spiritual development and experience.

Listening into the Heart of Things was originally published in 1989 in German, and at that time the Swiss government was just giving legal permission for the Swiss Society of

Physicians for Psycholytic Therapy to use psychedelics and empathogens in their work. Except for a few short footnotes the book does not discuss what has happened in Switzerland since then; and an update is needed. Nonetheless the book remains a courageous acknowledgement of the value of psychedelics in psycho-spiritual growth and healing; and a wise testament and inspiration to practitioners of the Way of Psychotherapy and all who want to get the most out of their consciousness exploration. •

Listening into the Heart of Things is available from Mind Books. European readers may also obtain the book from Basic Editions, Waldeckstrasse 8, CH-2575 Gerolfingen, Switzerland, tel: 41-32-396-1675, fax: 41-32-396-1676, E-mail: kurt.marti@datacomm.ch.

Gary Bravo contact information:
E-mail: G1bravo@aol.com